

BRIAN PETERS & JEFF DAVIS**Sharp's Appalachian Harvest**

Pugwash Music PUGCD 009

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There's a perception in some quarters that, when Cecil Sharp went song-hunting in the Appalachian mountains nearly a hundred years ago, he was enjoying a sort of toff's holiday while his countrymen were slugging it out with Kaiser Bill. In fact, as the liner notes of this album tell us, he spent much of that three-year period in extreme privation, suffering constant headaches, heat exhaustion, fevers and toothache (he had to have six removed). Was it worth it? Sharp certainly thought so, and on the evidence here, he was right.

Sharp's Appalachian Harvest is just that, a judicious selection from the hundreds of songs he and his amanuensis Maud Karpeles collected in South Carolina between 1916 and 1919. Brian Peters and Jeff Davis have put in the hours, researching both the songs and Cecil's adventures, and the result is not just this CD but also an associated stage show. The CD booklet and wrapper are studded with photos of the singers Sharp collected from, all weird beards, tattered smocks and hats that at one time will have been small ground-digging mammals. You'd have just loved to hear what those men and women sounded like. But it was in the days before taping, and Sharp did it all with his trusty notebooks. You could easily believe, however, that Jeff Davis had walked right out of one of those grainy photos. He has a voice like a knapped flint and a mastery of the old mountain singing style that is clearly the product of many years immersion in available recordings. The contrast with Brian Peters' smoother delivery and bluff Derbyshire vowels is initially disconcerting and made me smile, but it makes more sense the more you listen. And they sound great together on the many wacky gibberish-strewn choruses you'll find here.

Instrumentally they have it all sewn up: banjo, guitar, fiddles, mandolin, jew's harp, and the occasional sortie into anglo concertina, mandocello and spoons. It's tight, expressive and unfussy playing, faithfully following the shape of the songs.

And the songs, the songs...! Every one a beauty, from the hurtling, incendiary opening track *Jack Went A-Sailing* to the plaintive closer *Hold On*. Most of the selections clearly have their roots in the British Isles, but have been thoroughly acclimatised—though it's striking to find three ballads (William Taylor, Barbara Allen and *False Knight On The Road*) in 3:2 time, a fairly uncommon time signature in American song; and all three have superb and unusual melodies that revival singers will pounce upon with unbridled glee.

The accompanying booklet is plump with scholarly commentary and wry anecdote, a testament to the amount of time and energy the two chaps have put into the project. You kinda know that Cecil would have approved.

Raymond Greenoaken